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ABSTRACT

Correctional officers, often subject to sustained job stress and ambiguity, must possess adequate coping skills to deal with a hostile clientele. Psychological screening, therefore, assumes an important role in correctional officer recruitment. Prior to a recruitment drive, 650 employed correctional officers completed an MMPI and a biographical questionnaire, and were interviewed by an experienced officer, and, in some cases, by a counseling psychologist. Officers were rated as "acceptable" (N=448), "marginal" (N=164), or "not acceptable" (N=38). Date were obtained for the first 10 months of service regarding disciplinary actions, corrective interviews, absenteeism, and lateness. Those officers rated "not acceptable" were found to have significantly more corrective interviews, absences, and latenesses than did those in the other groups. Results indicate that formal psychological screening of correctional officers may be of practical and predictive value. (Author/NRB)

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Pre-Employment Psychological Evaluation as a Predictor of Correction Officer Job Performance

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Pre-Employment Psychological Evaluation as a Predictor of Correction Officer Job Performance

Correction Officers, particularly in a large metropolitan penal system, are subject to conditions of sustained stress and ambiquity (Brodsky, 1977). Responsible for the care, custody and control of inmates, as well as the safety of fellow officers and civilians, they must deal with a hostile and often dangerous clientele. Working without weapons, they must rely upon judgment, poise, leadership and other personal qualities in order to maintain order and discharge their responsibilities. If they lack the requiste coping skills, the consequences can be severe exacerabation of tensions, disruptions, violence, escapes and even riots. Off-duty hours also require controlled, mature behavior. Since Correction Officers in many areas are entitled to purchase weapons, without a permit, in order to facilitate off-duty arrests, it is essential to their Departments, and to the interests of public safety, that they be sufficiently stable to avoid abuse.

For these reasons, psychological screening is assuming an increasingly important role in Correction Officer recruitment.

A nationwide survey, conducted in 1975 (Goldstein) , revealed that 42 out of the 46 responding states indicated that they screened applicants "to identify those emotionally or psychologically unfit for correction work". The survey indicated a wide variation in screening procedures, including one or more of the following: personal interview, medical exams, written exams, background checks, screening committee interview, and probationary service. While most of the jurisdictions (34 out of 46) expressed satisfaction with the effectiveness of their procedures, little indication was offered as to how this effectiveness was evaluated.

To date, there is very little in the literature on the validation of psychological screening procedures for peace officers. Less than a dozen studies have been done analyzing the relationship between predictor measures and subsequent performance, and, for a variety of reasons, the results have been less than enlightening. Downey and Signori (1958)did an early study on a sample of 100 officers in British Columbia, classified as "good" or "poor" on supervisor rating. They administered a battery of tests to these subjects and found some scales to significantly discriminating, including the MMPI validity, depression, psychasthenia, social introversion, hostility and dominance scales.

Perdue (1964) did a similar study of Correction Officers at the Virginia Penitentiary, using the Johnson Temperament Analysis, and compared those receiving the highest service rating to others. Because the sample was small, and no one received test scores outside the normal range, no statististics were performed, but the observation was made that the better employees were less nervous, more self-controlled, reliable, and perhaps cautious in dealing with others. Another effort to establish validity for psychometric instruments were undertaken by Holland, Heim and Held in 1976, who compared the MMPI profiles of a group of applicants hired at a correctional facility in California against those of the group not hired. Although an "average profile" for the group as a whole was demonstrated (midly psychopathic adjustment, outgoing, somewhat superficial and manipulative, not likely to engage in repetitive anti-social behavior), no significant difference was demonstrated between the two groups.

While the foregoing studies were somewhat vague in their definition of performance criteria, some efforts have been made to establish more rigorous and empirically derived criteria. The State of Michigan (1971) compared selection interview and vocational exam results to subsequent supervisor ratings of five selected job dimensions arrived at by a consensus of supervisors.

Correlations between selection scores and performance were significant at the .01 level. French (1973) conducted a multijurisdictional study for the State of Michigan relating biographical data to performance ratings on job dimensions and behavior checklists, developed from a consensus of successful and unsuccessful job behaviors. The results were not particulary useful, nor were those of other studies utilizing job description criteria (Skinas, 1974; Kane and Chalmer, 1974; Fraley, 1975; and Borman, 1977).

A major weakness of most of these studies appears to be the small number of subjects evaluated (Skinas: n=108; Kane and Chalmar: n=66; Fraley: n=65). In this large urban correctional system, a unique opportunity was afforded to conduct an investigation of much larger scope: an ongoing longitudinal study of over 1300 Correction Officer recruits, hired over a two year period.

During this period, the Department's Psychological Research and Assessment staff was able to document the progress of these individuals from the day of initial screening through the first ten months of service, and, in so doing, to explore the relationship between job success and test scores, background data, peer ratings, psychologist rating, and other criteria utilized in the psychological evaluation process.

Because the individuals hired in this period included both those "recommended" and "not recommended" by the psychologist, a viable comparison group was available, and it was possible to establish more definitively the validity of psychological screening in the law enforcement setting. The following study details the major findings to date.

Subjects

The subjects of this study were 1315 Correction Officers hired between May, 1978 and May, 1980. Approximately 86% of them were males, and 14% were females. Blacks and Whites comprised about 42% each of the total group, with the balance mainly Hispanic. Ages ranged from 18 to 38, with a mean age of 27.7. For some of the candidates, additional information is not available. Nearly 30% were known to be single at the time of recruitment, approximately 40% were married, and 8.5% were separated or divorced. All were required to have the equivalent of a high school education. At least 48% met only the minimum requirement, an additional 23% had some college experience, and 6.2% more had a college degree. Most candidates had some job experience, although at least 8.9% had never worked full time. On the average, they had held between two and three jobs. Of those for whom we have information, over 20% had an arrest record. Those having at least one arrest numbered 195. Two individuals had as many as five arrests and at least 50 officers had one or more convictions for misdemeanors.

The total pool of 1315 subjects was examined for incidence of termination, resignation, or failure to report for the job. A sub-group of 650 Officers who completed 10 months of service were scrutinized on more specific measures of job performance.

Method

During the recruitment period, the Officers received a psychological evaluation based upon their background, a psychological profile as measured by the MMPI, an overall rating by an experienced Correction Officer interviewer, and, in questionable cases, an interview by a counseling psychologist. Forty percent received this interview. The first group, the "A's", consisted of those whose background/work record and psychological profiles were judged "clear"; the second, the "B's", consisted of those whose profiles and/or background presented some doubts about suitability for the job. The final group, the "C's", consisted of those whose psychological status and/or background was highly questionable. They usually showed strong evidence of psychopathology and/or character disorders corroborated by background data. This group was not recommended for the job.

The final decision to hire was not made at this level, but by a personnel committee of "uniformed" and civilian administrators within the Department. Of the total group of individuals hired or offered the job, 60% were rated A, 28.5% were rated B, and 10.8% were rated C. These groups were then compared on the following performance indices:

Total Group
-incidence of termination, resignation, and failure to report for the job

Sub-Group (all those completing 10 months on job to date)
-number of separate absences, longest single absence, and nature of disability, with particular emphasis on job-related accidents
-number and nature of incidents of lateness, with particular emphasis on those having three or more incidents
-number of corrective interviews, institutional procedures invoked at the discretion of the Commanding Officer to warn an officer that he or she had committed an infraction of institutional rules
-number of disciplinary actions, proceeding instituted against an Officer for more severe infractions or violations of Departmental rules.

This information was derived from a ten-month follow-up report, which is completed for each recruit towards the end of his or her probationary period by the supervisors in their assigned institutions.

Results

Table 1 documents the job tenure status of the entire pool of

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Insert Table 1 here

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candidates. With regard to resignations and terminations, there is no constant time frame included. Some candidates have been working for more than a year, others for less than a month. Most noteworthy of these findings is the apparent tendency of those "not recommended" by the psychologist, the "C's", to decline the job when offered. However, once hired, they appear to be least likely of all the groups to resign. Although not statistically significant, the most likely to be terminated appear to be the "B's", or questionable individuals.

Table 2, which documents the incidence of negative job

Insert Table 2 here

Table 1

Current Job Status for 1315 Correction Officers*

Job Status	Passed	Questionable	Not Recommended	Total
Still Working	635 (79.7%)	289 (76.9%)	120 (84.5%)	1044 (79.4%)
Resigned	100 (12.5%)	51 (13.6%)	8 (5.6%)	159 (12.1%)
Was Terminated	13 (1.6%)	12 (3.2%)	1 (0.7%)	26 (2.0%)
Declined Job	49 (6.1%)	24 (6.4%)	13 (9.2%)	86 (6.5%)
Total	797 (100%)	376 (100%)	142 (100%)	1315 (100%)

* About 50% of sample have not been on the job for as long as 10 months.

Table 2

Incidence of Criteria Behaviors

for 650 Correction Officers

at End of 10 Months Employment

Follow Up Behaviors	Group A (n=448)	Group B (n=164)	Group C (n=38)	Total (n=650)
One or more Disciplinary Actions	21 (4.7%)	11 (6.4%)	2 (5.4%)	34 (5.2%)
One or more Corrective Interviews	64 (14.3%)	16 (10.0%)	12 (31.6%)	92 (14.3%)
Three or more separate absences	79 (17.6%)	24 (14.9%)	11 (28.9%)	113 (17.5%)
Three or more latenesses	148 (33.0%)	47 (29.4%)	19 (50.0%)	213 (33.0%)
One or more of the above	213 (47.5%)	71 (43.3%)	28 (73.7%)*	312 (48.0%)

* $\chi^2 = 11.2$, df=2, $p \leq .01$

behaviors for the 10-month follow-up group, is more illuminating. As the table indicates, the C group was significantly more likely to have some degree of job difficulty during the 10-month period. Although there was no noticeable difference between the groups in number of disciplinary actions, the "C's" comprised a noticeably larger percentage of those receiving one or more corrective interviews, having three or more absences, and three or more instances of lateness.

Most interesting, perhaps, is the relationship of the "C" group to a hypothetical "Trouble Variable", developed by the investigators for comparison purposes. The "Trouble Variable" consisted of the presence of one or more of the following for an individual:

a) at least one disciplinary action, and/or

b) at least one corrective interview, and/or

c) at least three or more separate absences, and/or

d) three or more separate times late

As Table 2 indicates, a significantly larger number of those hired, but not recommended by the psychologist, encountered some difficulty during their first ten months of tenure when compared with other recommended recruits ($x^2=11.2$, $df=2$, $p \leq .01$). Those not recommended had 25 to 30 % higher probability of encountering problems on the job as defined above.

Discussion

The results reported above indicate that strong negative psychological evaluations can point to observed difficulties in job adjustment as measured by available criteria. In evaluating the significance of these preliminary results, it is necessary to note the limitations of the performance measures used. In this study, we are unable to document postive behaviors, such as departmental commendations or promotions, since these officers have been on the job for so short a period of time.

In addition, the above criteria are far from ideal measures of job performance. In the best of all possible worlds, empirically derived standards based on a carefully developed job description would serve as the performance measures. Unfortunately, the political and practical realities of the department make this nearly impossible, particularly where such a large number of subjects are involved. Barring the ideal, the present study required criteria that were at least accessible, documented, and uniformly applied. The 10-month follow-up reports best served this need. In proper evaluation of this study, the following limitations should be noted:

1) The high rate of attrition among Correction Officers (one of six of those taking the job are no longer with the Department ten months later) places great pressure upon the Department to keep the ranks full.

This sometimes results in a reluctance to evaluate negatively, and a tendency to keep Correction Officers working, despite what might be considered significantly lower than average performance levels. In addition to this need to give recruits every chance to succeed, there is an internal code of solidarity and mutual protection among officers and supervisors, which promotes the tendency to evaluate positively. "What goes around comes around" is an adage which, perhaps, best expresses the rationale for this code. The feeling is that an Officer who "blows the whistle" on another will eventually encounter problems of his own with no backup support. Thus, there is an administrative difficulty in generating meaningful performance data.

2) In addition to this, there are problems with the comparability of available data. This correctional system is not uniform in character, but includes a wide diversity of institutions, conditions and practices. The level of stress varies significantly from one institution to another, as do management styles and attitudes. An institution which requires a great deal of overtime work from its Officers will often experience a high absence rate compared to one where the work is less hectic or stressful. Similarly, those institutions which are less physically accessible than others will generally reflect a higher incidence of lateness. Variation in administrative practices also complicates the picture. The decision to take disciplinary measures appears to be a somewhat

arbitrary one. The decision rests solely with the Commanding Officer, and standards vary significantly. It is, therefore, important to avoid premature generalizations to other law enforcement systems.

Nonetheless, the data do provide at least a partial index of job adjustment, especially at the extremes, as the results indicate. Perhaps the fact that it is so difficult to obtain valid performance data, makes the results that much more salient.

In any case, results reported here do indicate that formal psychological screening of Correction Officers may be of practical and predictive value. In the long run, proper and valid screening programs may help Departments avoid the economic burdens of hiring unsuitable applicants. While further follow-up research is conducted on the Officers in this study and others, it is appropriate for the results to be considered by those developing theories and programs for the hiring of law enforcement officers.

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